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# THE NEW POETRY.

BY W. D. HOWELLS.

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ANY inquiry into the facts concerning a phase of literature primarily, if not mainly, interesting to the younger sort of readers must begin with a certain misgiving in the inquirer as to his fitness for making it, if he is himself no longer so very young. Poetry exists so largely in the pleasure it gives, that if one does not find the pleasure in it that one formerly found, one is apt to think it does not exist at all. The sage is often disqualified for instruction upon such a point by the very years which have enriched his knowledge. He is too ready to say, for example, that people do not read poetry nearly so much as in his day, because he does not now read it himself so much; and, of course, he is ready to infer that this is because it is not so well worth reading. It is some such disability in the sage, which, I think, one would do well to keep in mind while listening to his conclusions with the respect due his venerable age.

## I.

After all, it is the point of view which governs in matters of this kind. It is always easy to show that what passes for poetry in any given time is not poetry, because it is not of the mood and temperament of the poetry of another given time. Pope was once a great poet, and then he was a very small poet, or none at all; again people are beginning to think there was a good deal of poetry in Pope. It has been so with Byron, even to the same sort of renaissance. Wordsworth began by being no poet at all in both the popular and the critical estimation; then he was one of the greatest poets; now it is doubtful if he was one of the greatest. Longfellow's acceptance was once far more than English-wide; now the sun sets in more than one region on his fame. It must

be owned, even by those who, like me, thought him all but divine, that Tennyson is in a certain eclipse; outside of the Browning Clubs, if there are still Browning Clubs, it will be allowed that Browning is on the wane. Doubtless both these poets are destined to a renaissance, but hardly to a revival of the midday and evening glories that are past for them. One or two fixed stars shine steadfastly in the firmament; but there was a long spell of weather when Milton could hardly be seen even with a glass; and there was more than a century when Shakespeare could be made out only by the curious observer. It would, perhaps, be safe to say that the time will never come again when Shakespeare will be read less than now; but as for Milton, has his renaissance quite lasted to our day? We all know, or we all own, his greatness; but do we read him?

Within the memory of men still young, or at least of women still young, there have been finer gradations of change by which poets, still favorites, have been shifted in their standing, and are topped in the public favor by other poets, cunning to say the last thing that the public thinks it thinks. One need not go nearly so far back as Mr. Swinburne or as William Morris or Dante Rossetti for illustration; one need go back only so far as Mr. Andrew Lang or Mr. Austin Dobson, who were before Mr. Kipling was, or Mr. Watson was. The poetry of Mr. Lang and of Mr. Dobson was concurrent with an emotion which has exhausted itself, from which it sprang, which it prolonged, and of which it remains the charming record; but it is not the poetry first in the mind and heart of 1899, as it was in the mind and heart of 1889.

## II.

Then, what is the poetry first in the mind and heart of 1899? I believe I have said what in naming Mr. Kipling, who is at this moment, possibly, the most famous man in the world, and whose work, in some sort of measure, is known almost as widely as his name. All must own this, whatever any may think of his work; and it seems to me that the fact ought to dispose of the doubt whether this is a poetry-reading age. In no other age has the celebrity, the performance of a poet been so far-reaching as those of this young man of thirty-two; and I do not forget Byron in saying this. Of course, the means of universal diffusion are vastly greater than in Byron's time; but the world is also larger.

The fact has not so much to do with the quality of Mr. Kipling's poetry as we might think, and I may safely say this in my sense of its great qualities. It is none the less a prodigious thing to utter one's age, or one's day, as Mr. Kipling has uttered his, to sound the dominant of its scale so that it shall be felt in the nerves vibrating to the limit of our race, which is our world. The prodigy is none the less because this dominant is the note of race-patriotism, which is so much less pleasing to some fine ears than "the still, sad music of humanity." It is a mighty and a lusty note, full of faith and hope; and it is the note which makes Mr. Kipling famous wherever an Anglo-Saxon word is spoken or an Anglo-Saxon shot is fired; it stirs the blood both of Briton and American; and it is not the poet's reproach if they forget the deeper meanings of his song. He says what he came to say; he happened in the time which could hear his voice; he does not so much teach as tell; but no doubt the time will come when the warning in his message will be plain to senses now holden. It may not be plain to our American senses, till we have trampled into the red mire of tropic morasses the faith in men which made us the hope of men; but that is not the blame of a poet who has read us and said us more keenly than any alien before.

It is inevitable that the universal acceptance of Mr. Kipling should ignore the beauty of his work, except such obvious beauty as lives in its potent music and its bold picturesqueness; but the other sort of beauty can safely bide its time; for, though he is so immensely and intensely of our day, he is not for our day alone. He is useful to the present argument as a proof that our day is not so prosaic as it might seem without his overwhelming popularity. But in the same sky with the comet blaze there are lambent planets to which the eye turns from the wonder and the portent, and willingly gives a watch of the night. The wonder and the portent is not less in its kind because of their difference in brightness; and the difference is so great that any sort of parallel would be futile and tiresome.

### III.

I shall not, therefore, try to contrast my pleasure in Mr. William Watson's poetry with my pleasure in Mr. Rudyard Kipling's poetry, or in fact do much more than affirm it. But I may say without disadvantage to either that there is in Mr. Watson's verse

nothing of the primal force of Mr. Kipling's, that swing of orient seas, that beat of orient suns. One is English where the other is Imperial; one is contemplative where the other is mystical; one feeds his flocks beside the Thames, the other drives his herds over the Asian plains, where our race began, and arrives from the morning with something of the eldest splendor upon him. It should not be strange, though it is surpassingly interesting, to note how much more immediate the one poet is who is really less modern than the other; for our passions are always of the prime, while our convictions are the slow effect of an educated conscience beginning late in the centuries.

Mr. Watson's work is very charming to me, because I find in it a grace that seems to have come willingly and quietly; a gentle insight; a serene thoughtfulness; most intelligent sympathy with the peculiar things that are the universal; a gracious doubt; a delicate passion; an essential repose. His unwearying and unerring art, the perfect music of his phrase, the exquisite good fortune of his diction are the minor qualities that follow the clear thought and the pure feeling. Here, in this time which some of us have been saying is unpoetical, is a poet who recalls the glory of the golden age when Keats and Shelley, when Coleridge and Wordsworth were reluming the Elizabethan splendors of English rhyme, and lighting the way for Tennyson and Browning. With like magic he has won his way into the hearts that love the great tradition, and his unquestioned welcome by a large average of readers is proof that he has not fallen upon an inhospitable day. It appears that we not only love poetry, but we love poetry that often deals with life through literature, and in its most direct appeals has still something to remind us of books, and, in the new pleasure it imparts, to make us remember old pleasures. Any one looking through the recent volume of Mr. Watson's *Collected Poems* must be struck with the large number of pieces recording his veneration and affection for the masters who embody the spirit of poetry for him, and whose genius he divines and announces so subtly. Wordsworth, Shelley, Arnold, Lander, Shelley again, Tennyson, Shakespeare, Keats, Dobson, Byron, Shakespeare again, Aubrey de Vere, Burns, Aldrich: these, in this accidental order are the channels, if not the sources of poetry, to which he recurs, and from which he draws as fresh inspiration as he draws from life. They are, of course, as much a part of life as anything

else in the world; not all the books are found in running brooks, not all the sermons in stones. The poems that deal with these poets are each a characterization full of the surprise and rapture of perfection. When the poet leaves his library he is still in his scholar's gown, and he does not see nature or human nature less truly or clearly because he sees it with the scholar's eye.

Mr. Watson is very English, and when he stretches a hand across the channel or across the ocean it is with a sense of effort, at least in the witness. But he is not chauvinist English, even if he is helplessly English. He has not escaped the white man's burden of patriotism, but his patriotism is not blindly proud, and it is for England's true glory, for the humanity and the mercy which she seems to have forgotten in her fury of imperialism. The sonnets in which he reproaches her for her acquiescence in Turkish cruelties are quite as noble as if they had or could have any effect upon her policy; his patriotism is not the grain of sand between the teeth of alien readers which patriotism is apt to be. Still, patriotism of whatever sort is not a spring of the purest and sweetest poetry; commonly, it is a source thick with ignorance and self-interest, reflecting the most cockahoop conceit; but the worst that can be said of Mr. Watson's patriotism is that it entreats England to remember her old humanity as if it were something English, and not something common to good men of all climes and races.

#### IV.

If one were to sum up one's sense of Mr. Watson's poetry as a whole, one might speak of it as a delicate and beautiful criticism of life in man and things, of life in books and souls. When one had done this, however, one would not be satisfied, for it would seem to limit the poet on sides where the most elastic praise could not well confine him. In like manner, if one were to say of a somewhat newer English poet that, with whatever foregleams his path was crossed, Mr. F. B. Money-Coutts had not yet found his way quite into the light, that his thinking had not always become thought, that his artistic deed was still often in the artistic will, one would be doing injustice to a measure of performance that gives the hope of much more. He is to be counted with those later English poets who wish their countrymen to think and feel sanely, and he is imbued with the humanity and the spiritu-

ality which, if they mistakenly like to claim themselves English, are not otherwise in error. He adds his voice to those that, in a war-drunken time, are for peace; and throughout his work is the beauty of rightmindedness, which in itself is a sort of genius, and which lends the grace of quite a new attitude, of an impassioned conscience in certain pieces of his dealing with passion.

The same purity is in the poetry of Mr. E. H. Coleridge, which is more purely poetry, and more singly devoted to the things in which the universal masks as the personal. It is interesting and it is charming to find this new Coleridge at his best in the fantastic strain, the playfulness, the intimacy in which the ancestral Coleridge excelled. There are three characterizations, or portraits of young girls, so young as to be not yet young girls, which are as delicately critical as Mr. Watson's studies of poets; and in all Mr. Coleridge's verse there is the better modern spirit, the spirit which is beginning to reflect upon what it has thought, and which upon the whole seems to me the distinguishing spirit of the new English poetry.

I find this so in the poems of Mr. Stephen Phillips, a much more passionate poet than Mr. Watson, or Mr. Money-Coutts, or Mr. Coleridge, but of much the same critical, the same ethical fineness. My words undersay it, of course; I mean something rarer than critical, something better than ethical, and perhaps I had better retreat upon such a word as spiritual. Spiritual in a fine way Mr. Phillips's work is, running into frank realism where a modern theme is dealt with, and keeping a high idealism where the question is of fable, or of faith. His poems of "The Woman with a Dead Soul," and "The Wife" are examples in the one sort, and his "Marpessa" and "Christ in Hades" are instances in the other. In power of picturing to the imagination they are all of like charm, and in them all one feels the glow of the poet's youth. Tennyson at his age had not done better; but the tint, if any, that he has from Tennyson is that of the mature fancy working in such things as "Sea Dreams" and "Tithonus." There are a few more of the beautiful words than one could wish, perhaps (I found myself senilely impatient of them at last), but Mr. Phillips's words are beautiful; they were never so securely elect as Mr. Watson's; but, then, whose words are?

The same spiritualized reality, the same suggestion of the middle-period of Tennyson, are in some things of Mr. John Dav-

idson's, some of his greatest things, though he is greatest of all when he is most himself. "The Ordeal" and "The Coward" are poems that need not be abashed in the presence of the best of the Idyls of the King; they are both indeed poems of surpassing truth and pathos; but the very John Davidson speaks with his own voice to supreme effect in such pieces as "The Hymn of Abdul Hamid," the tremendously veracious "War-Song," "Holiday at Hampton Court," "Waiting," "The Aristocrat," and that eclogue between "The Artist and the Votary." Till now, English speech has uttered no such burning truth about the shame of selfish diplomacy, the inalienable criminality of aggressive war, the horror of prison-waste, the hardy insolence of money-might, the hope of life that dwells among the dead. It is all far more than worth reading; it, perhaps more than any other new poetry, embodies the universal human spirit, the spirit of the vast unfriended, unbounded commonness, before which imperialism shrinks to the measure of parochialism. It would be a wrong that I should deeply regret if I gave an impression of something hortatory, something less than artistic in work so splendid, and I wish to say that this poet is never so much a poet as when he is giving voice to the mute protest in every conscience against the ferocious pretences of our Zeitgeist.

## V.

Tennyson is gone, Browning is gone, Rossetti and William Morris are gone; Swinburne is silent; the verse of Mr. Dobson, so airily imaginative, so graciously creative, is not of the immediate charm it once was; and a new kind of English poetry, spiritualized, humanized, has appeared in the books which I have been so ineffectually studying. So far as it is characterized by the past it is characterized by the art of Tennyson, and reasonably so because that is the supreme poetic art. There are also hints of Wordsworth, hints of Keats, hints of Shelley in the new poetry; but no hint of Byron, and what is stranger, none of Browning; perhaps because these were not artistic poets, and the new poetry is as artistic as it is spiritual.

As a condition of English poetry, what has American poetry to show? With us the greatest ones are gone, too. Bryant, Emerson, Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell, Holmes, have passed into a shadow which shall lift more or less hereafter. We have Mr. Stedman and Mr. and Mrs. Stoddard, we have Mr. Aldrich and



Mr. Gilder, we have Mr. Hay and Mr. Harte, we have Mr. and Mrs. Piatt, who all continue our old tradition and are all poets of true quality and of ascertained importance. But they write little, and they are hardly, with all their charm, characteristic of the time. Foremost of our poets who have spoken to and for the day which is not yet yesterday, I should say was James Whitcomb Riley, who has known how to endear himself to a wider range of American humanity than any other American poet. If his popularity were the sole proof of the enduring love of poetry among us it would be no weak proof. It might not imply that poetry generally was so much read as it once was, but it would imply that poetry of exquisite loveliness in whatever guise it wore had come home to the common heart as it had not before. Probably the most widely read American poems in their time were Longfellow's "Hiawatha" and Whittier's "Snow-Bound;" but Mr. Riley's poetry is much more widely read than either. It reaches the lettered as well as the unlettered; it has had the courage of the familiar, the homely, qualities which are the most widely felt, and it is not because it is American (although we like it so), but because it is human that it finds its way over the fruitful levels where men are all equal. I do not prize it less than the new English poetry in form or spirit, for I think Mr. Riley a very great artist, with insight as subtle as the best of the new English poets, and sympathy as generous. The Hoosier parlance which he has subdued to rhyme has not the consecration which time has given the Scottish dialect in Ramsay and Burns, but it says things as tenderly and as intimately, and on the lips of this master it is music. If he is above all others the American poet, his primacy is significant of a more entire liberation to our native genius than we have yet realized; at the least and lowest, here is a poet who could have come in no other time or place than ours; and quite so much could not have been said of any American poet before. One feels this not only in his Hoosier verse, but in his poems in literary English; he is still essentially the poet of our common life; and perhaps hereafter the soul of that life may be divined best, in its sweetness and sincerity and purity, in the verse which is of such friendly familiarity that some may not yet prize it aright.

The American poet who has the closest affinity with the new English poets in their artistry is Mr. Madison Cawein. A more

meridional heat and lustre is in the verse of this young Kentuckian, which at one time seemed rather to lose its meaning in the mere tints and dyes of phrase, but which has since cleared itself and runs with a crystalline limpidity. It is not Keats who is repeated in his poetry, but the "simple, sensuous, passionate" ideal of Keats, as in Keats himself the old Elizabethan and Chaucerian ideal was repeated. Mr. Cawein has not yet found the public to which he is destined, and when it is found it may not be a very large one, but it will be choice, and of a devoted belief in him.

Something like this might be said of Mr. Lloyd Mifflin, a name yet much unknown to that general reader who is so vague and intangible, but who must be invoked before a fit audience can be got together for any poet. In the volume of sonnets, called "At the Gates of Song," this poet makes his appeal to the best in us, with a mastery of his instrument as extraordinary as the sense is high and noble. What strikes one most in this very striking group of poems is the power both pictorial and intellectual which represents a new quality of thinking and feeling, or a new way of rendering the serious and significant aspects of life. If such a book were altogether to fail of recognition it would be the most damaging witness against a time which I think has been unjustly accounted prosaic. But a little more courage to know what is undeniably great, although it is our own, seems to me still desirable in our criticism, and when that comes, Mr. Mifflin's poetry will have its reward.

From all this it is a long way to the far different region where Mrs. Charlotte Perkins Stetson has made a place of her own. Her civic satire is of a form which she has herself invented; it recalls the work of no one else; you can say of it (and I have said this before), that since the Biglow Papers there has been no satire approaching it in the wit flashing from profound conviction; but this comparison suggests a likeness which does not exist; the humor and sarcasm of Mrs. Stetson, indeed, teach by parable, but not through character as the Biglow Papers do. They are distinctly and unmistakably a force, but how widely they are felt, I cannot say. The time has already come when nearly the whole reading and writing population of the North claims to have sprung from the Original Abolitionists, and the Biglow Papers are now of a respectable acceptance which their writer never dreamed of or cared for when he wrote them; but

the time has not yet come when we desire to have the Original Socialists for our ancestors, and I am afraid that the acceptance of Mrs. Stetson's satire is mostly confined to fanatics, philanthropists and other Dangerous Persons. But that need not keep us from owning its brilliancy.

The contribution of Mr. Hamlin Garland to what one might call, without offence, Americanistic poetry, is something too notable to be passed over. The prairies and the woods, the cornfields and the coulés of the Northern West speak in his verse, a little too consciously, perhaps, but always strenuously and with a native charm, in a voice not to be mistaken for any other's. The poems are sometimes wronged by a wilful rudeness of form, but they are not spoiled by it, and there is the hope of yet greater things in them.

I name, rather at random, certain of our poets who seem to me cases in point, and I am not trying to name all who are worthy of mention. But I could not leave out the name of Paul Dunbar, the young negro poet, who has won popularity as well as recognition. It is a proof of the love of poetry in a time and country apparently so prosaic as ours that he has quickly made himself widely known, and has found not only favor but affection. It is not as a phenomenon that he has done this, not merely as the first negro who has been able to deal objectively with negroism; it is as something far more positive, it is as an absolute poet. In the verse that he has written since his earliest volume was published, he has carried his work on rather than up; but if he went no higher than the mark he struck at first he would still have made good his claim to our attention, and would have become inalienably a part of our literary history.

## VI.

The group of young Canadian poets whom we have learned to enjoy is as a whole rather more dramatically impressive than any like groups among ourselves. Death has lately hushed the sweetest and clearest voice among them; Archibald Lampman is no more. But his spirit abides and his art remains. The one sought to interpret faultlessly in the other the beauty of the summer which burns amidst the northern snows; and the first thing to be said of all the Canadians is that they are all naturalists. Bryant himself was not more direct and single in his worship of nature

than these young poets who are not otherwise like him. In him was a cold electric flame thrilling from the deeply intellectualized sources of the puritan consciousness; but these young Canadians, who are so like us other Americans, and who have some of them made their home with us, derive æsthetically from the England that was before, and has been since, the time when puritanism fixed a gulf between her and us. They are on all accounts a most interesting group, which I should like to study more closely and fully; but a passing glance divines them in the superficial traits that represent their essential qualities. They are pictorial, rather than dramatic; the characteristic which they have most in common is that love of nature in which each of them appears a sort of solitary. Their delicate art is curiously unsocialized; the pulse of the time which beats so strongly in the new English poetry is scarcely felt in their rapture with their native skies and woods and lakes.

At least this is the impression that their work has left with one who does not pretend to know it exhaustively, but still has greatly enjoyed it. One might easily make too much of it; after all, it is not of vast bulk; and here, toward the end of what I have to say of the new poetry, I am tormented with an unhandsome misgiving that I have been making too much of it on every side. The names of the great poets who are gone recur to me dismayingly, almost accusingly. What are all the new Presences when confronted with such tremendous Absences as Browning and Emerson, Longfellow and Tennyson, Rossetti and Lowell, Arnold and Whittier, Holmes and Morris, and the great companionless vague which was once Walt Whitman? I am almost afraid to make answer; I can only shrinkingly suggest that To-day may soon be brow-beating To-morrow as Yesterday is now brow-beating To-day.

Again I wish that I could know just how a younger man felt concerning the fact, which is rather a question. I am of the past, too, in my small way, and perhaps I am no fit judge of the present. I would gladly yield the judgment seat (which is never so luxuriously upholstered as people think), but before I left it, I might like to say in defence of the new poetry that if it did not come from poets so great as those gone, it came from poets as true. I might hint at the proposition, with which I have sometimes toyed, that the potentiality of the arts was now almost as widely

diffused as the suffrage, and that if their effect was no longer so profound it was farther reaching over the areas reclaimed from the common ignorance. It is possible that in the modern democratization of poetry it is more widely read than ever before, though the great poets, the heroes and princes of song, are not read so much since their apotheosis. Judging from the satisfaction I have known in the poets of my own time, I might think that there never was a time whose poets uttered it so perfectly, so wholly. But what right have I to shake my sere and yellow leaves in doubt of the music which I hear in the air about me now? I do not feel the doubt, and I will not affect it; I wish I could be as sure that I felt the security and did not affect that; but I believe I have been tolerably honest in my praises of the new poetry, and I hope that I have made out not a bad case for it, though I have not assumed to prophesy concerning it. We poor critics can seldom get over our fancy that we decide the fate of poets; sometimes the poets themselves share our delusion; even readers are touched by it. But we really do nothing of the kind. We can say, "Ah, here is something rather nice," or, "*That* won't do," but there is always an appeal to a higher court, and in some very difficult cases the supreme tribunal of time reverses its own decisions.

W. D. HOWELLS.